

How Many Germans Died under RAF Bombs at Dresden in 1945?

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Introduction



The bombing of Dresden remains one of the deadliest and morally most-problematic raids of World War II. Three factors make the bombing of Dresden unique: 1) a huge firestorm developed that engulfed much of the city; 2) the firestorm engulfed a population swollen by refugees; and 3) defenses and shelters even for the original Dresden population were minimal.^[1] The result was a high death toll and the destruction of one of Europe's most beautiful and cultural cities.

Many conflicting estimates have been made concerning the number of deaths during the raids of Dresden on February 13-14, 1945. Historian Richard J. Evans estimates that approximately 25,000 people died during these bombings.^[2] Frederick Taylor estimates that from 25,000 to 40,000 people died as a result of the Dresden bombings.^[3] A distinguished commission of German historians titled "Dresden Commission of Historians for the Ascertainment of the Number of Victims of the Air Raids on the City of Dresden on 13/14 February 1945" estimates the likely death toll in Dresden at around 18,000 and definitely not more than 25,000.^[4] This later estimate is considered authoritative by many sources.

While exact figures of deaths in the Dresden bombings can never be obtained, some Revisionist historians estimate a death toll at Dresden as high as 250,000 people. Most establishment historians

state that a death toll at Dresden of 250,000 is an absolute impossibility. For example, Richard Evans states:

Even allowing for the unique circumstances of Dresden, a figure of 250,000 dead would have meant that 20% to 30% of the population was killed, a figure so grossly out of proportion to other comparable attacks as to have raised the eyebrows of anyone familiar with the statistics of bombing raids...even if the population had been inflated by an influx of refugees fleeing the advance of the Red Army.^[5]

Population of Dresden

Historians generally agree that a large number of German refugees were in Dresden during the night of February 13-14, 1945. However, the estimate of refugees in Dresden that night varies widely. This is a major reason for the discrepancies in the death toll estimates in the Dresden bombings.

Marshall De Bruhl states in his book *Firestorm: Allied Airpower and the Destruction of Dresden*:

Nearly every apartment and house [in Dresden] was crammed with relatives or friends from the east; many other residents had been ordered to take in strangers. There were makeshift campsites everywhere. Some 200,000 Silesians and East Prussians were living in tents or shacks in the Grosser Garten. The city's population was more than double its prewar size. Some estimates have put the number as high as 1.4 million.

Unlike other major German cities, Dresden had an exceptionally low population density, due to the large proportion of single houses surrounded by gardens. Even the built-up areas did not have the congestion of Berlin and Munich. However, in February 1945, the open spaces, gardens, and parks were filled with people.

The Reich provided rail transport from the east for hundreds of thousands of the fleeing easterners, but the last train out of the city had run on February 12. Transport further west was scheduled to resume in a few days; until then, the refugees were stranded in the Saxon capital.^[6]

David Irving states in *The Destruction of Dresden*:

Silesians represented probably 80% of the displaced people crowding into Dresden on the night of the triple blow; the city which in peacetime had a population of 630,000 citizens was by the eve of the air attack so crowded with Silesians, East Prussians and Pomeranians from the Eastern Front, with Berliners and Rhinelanders from the west, with Allied and Russian prisoners of war, with evacuated children's settlement, with forced laborers of many nationalities, that the increased population was now between 1,200,000 and 1,400,000 citizens, of whom, not surprisingly, several hundred thousand had no proper home and of whom none could seek the protection of an air-raid shelter.^[7]

A woman living on the outskirts of Dresden at the time of the bombings stated: "At the time my mother and I had train-station duty here in the city. The refugees! They all came from everywhere! The city was stuffed full!"^[8]

Frederick Taylor states in his book *Dresden: Tuesday, February 13, 1945* that Dresden had been accepting refugees from the devastated cities of the Ruhr, and from Hamburg and Berlin, ever since the British bombing campaign began in earnest. By late 1943 Dresden was already overstretched and finding

it hard to accept more outsiders. By the winter of 1944-1945, hundreds of thousands of German refugees were traveling from the east in an attempt to escape the Russian army.[\[9\]](#)

The German government regarded the acceptance of Germans from the east as an essential duty. *Der Freiheitskampf*, the official German organ for Saxony, urged citizens to offer temporary accommodation:

There is still room everywhere. No family should remain without guests! Whether or not your habits of life are compatible, whether the coziness of your domestic situation is disturbed, none of these things should matter! At our doors stand people who for the moment have no home—not even to mention the loss of their possessions.[\[10\]](#)

However, Taylor states that it was general policy in Dresden to have refugees on their way to the west to continue onwards within 24 hours. Fleeing the Russians was not a valid justification for seeking and maintaining residence in Dresden. Taylor states that the best estimate by Götz Bergander, who spent time on fire-watching duties and on refugee-relief work in Dresden, was that approximately 200,000 nonresidents were in Dresden on the night of February 13-14, 1945. Many of these refugees would have been living in quarters away from the targeted center of Dresden.[\[11\]](#)

The Dresden historian Friedrich Reichert estimates that only 567,000 residents and 100,000 refugees were in Dresden on the night of the bombings. Reichert quotes witnesses who state that no refugees were billeted in Dresden houses and that no billeting took place in Dresden's parks or squares. Thus, Reichert estimates that the number of people in Dresden on the night of the bombings was not much greater than the official figure of Dresden's population before the war.[\[12\]](#)

Reichert's estimate of Dresden's population during the bombings is almost certainly too low. As a RAF memo analyzed it before the attack:

Dresden, the seventh largest city in Germany and not much smaller than Manchester is also [by] far the largest unbombed built-up area the enemy has got. In the midst of winter with refugees pouring westwards and troops to be rested, roofs are at a premium, not only to give shelter to workers, refugees and troops alike, but also to house the administrative services displaced from other areas...[\[13\]](#)

Alexander McKee states in regard to Dresden:

Every household had its large quota of refugees, and many more had arrived in Dresden that day, so that the pavements were blocked by them, as they struggled onwards or simply sat exhausted on their suitcases and rucksacks. For these reasons, no one has been able to put a positive figure to the numbers of the dead, and no doubt no one ever will.[\[14\]](#)

The report prepared by the USAF Historical Division Research Studies Institute Air University states that "there may probably have been about 1,000,000 people in Dresden on the night of the 13/14 February RAF attack."[\[15\]](#) I think the 1 million population figure cited in this report constitutes a realistic and conservative minimum estimate of Dresden's population during the Allied bombings of February 13-14, 1945.

Did Only 25,000 People Die?

If the 25,000 death-toll estimate in Dresden is accurate, we are left with the odd result that Allied air power, employed for textbook purposes to its full measure and with no restrictions, over an especially vulnerable large city near the end of the war, when Allied air superiority was absolute and German defenses nearly nonexistent, was less effective than Allied air power had been in previous more-difficult operations such as Hamburg or Berlin. I think the extensive ruins left in Dresden suggest a degree of complete destruction not seen before in Germany.

The Dresden bombings created a massive firestorm of epic proportions, and were in no way a failed mission with only a fraction of the intended results. The fires from the first raid alone had been visible more than 100 miles from Dresden.^[16] The Dresden raid was the perfect execution of the Bomber Command theory of the double blow: two waves of bombers, three hours apart, followed the next day by a massive daylight raid by more bombers and escort fighters. Only a handful of raids ever actually conformed to this double-strike theory, and those that did were cataclysmic.^[17]

Dresden also lacked an effective network of air-raid shelters to protect its inhabitants. Hitler had ordered that over 3,000 air-raid bunkers be built in 80 German towns and cities. However, not one was built in Dresden because the city was not regarded as being in danger of air attack. Instead, the civil air defense in Dresden devoted most of its efforts to creating tunnels between the cellars of the housing blocks so that people could escape from one building to another. These tunnels exacerbated the effects of the Dresden firestorm by channeling smoke and fumes from one basement to the next and sucking out the oxygen from a network of interconnected cellars.^[18]

The vast majority of the population of Dresden did not have access to proper air-raid shelters. When the British RAF attacked Dresden that night, all the residents and refugees in Dresden could do was take refuge in their cellars. These cellars proved to be death traps in many cases. People who managed to escape from their cellars were often sucked into the firestorm as they struggled to flee the city.^[19]

Dresden was all but defenseless against air attack, and the people on the ground in Dresden suffered the consequences. The bombers in the Dresden raids were able to conduct their attacks relatively free from fear of harassment by German defenses. The master bombers ordered the bombers to descend to lower altitudes, and the crews felt confident in doing so and in maintaining a steady altitude and heading during the bombing runs. This ensured that the Dresden raids were particularly concentrated and thus particularly effective.^[20] The RAF conducted a technically perfect fire-raising attack on Dresden.^[21]

The British were fully aware that mass death and destruction could result from the bombing of Germany's cities. The Directorate of Bombing Operations predicted the following consequences from Operation Thunderclap:

If we assume that the daytime population of the area attacked is 300,000, we may expect 220,000 casualties. Fifty per cent of these or 110,000 may expect to be killed. It is suggested that such an attack resulting in so many deaths, the great proportion of which will be key personnel, cannot help but have a shattering effect on political and civilian morale all over Germany."^[22]

The destruction of Dresden was so complete that major companies were reporting fewer than 50% of their workforce present two weeks after the raids.^[23] By the end of February 1945, only 369,000

inhabitants remained in the city. Dresden was subject to further American attacks by 406 B-17s on March 2 and 580 B-17s on April 17, leaving an additional 453 dead.[\[24\]](#)

Comparison to Pforzheim Bombing

A raid that closely resembles that on Dresden was carried out 10 days later on February 23, 1945 at Pforzheim. Since neither Dresden nor Pforzheim had suffered much damage earlier in the war, the flammability of both cities had been preserved.[\[25\]](#) A perfect firestorm was created in both of these defenseless cities. These cities also lacked sufficient air-raid shelters for their citizens.

The area of destruction at Pforzheim comprised approximately 83% of the city, and 20,277 out of 65,000 people died according to official estimates.[\[26\]](#) Sönke Neitzel also estimates that approximately 20,000 out of a total population of 65,000 died in the raid at Pforzheim.[\[27\]](#) This means that over 30% of the residents of Pforzheim died in one bombing attack.

The question is: If more than 30% of the residents of Pforzheim died in one bombing attack, why would only approximately 2.5% of Dresdeners die in similar raids 10 days earlier? The second wave of bombers in the Dresden raid appeared over Dresden at the very time that the maximum number of fire brigades and rescue teams were in the streets of the burning city. This second wave of bombers compounded the earlier destruction many times, and by design killed the firemen and rescue workers so that the destruction in Dresden could rage on unchecked.[\[28\]](#) The raid on Pforzheim, by contrast, consisted of only one bombing attack. Also, Pforzheim was a much smaller target, so that it would have been easier for the people on the ground to escape from the blaze.

The only reason why the death-rate percentage would be higher at Pforzheim versus Dresden is that a higher percentage of Pforzheim was destroyed in the bombings. Alan Russell estimates that 83% of Pforzheim's city center was destroyed versus only 59% of Dresden's.[\[29\]](#) This would, however, account for only a portion of the percentage difference in the death tolls. Based on the death toll in the Pforzheim raid, it is reasonable to assume that a minimum of 20% of Dresdeners died in the British and American attacks on the city. The 2.5% death rate figure of Dresdeners estimated by establishment historians is an unrealistically low figure.

If a 20% death rate figure times an estimated population in Dresden of 1 million is used, the death-toll figure in Dresden would be 200,000. If a 25% death-rate figure times an estimated population of 1.2 million is used, the death toll figure in Dresden would be 300,000. Thus, death-toll estimates in Dresden of 250,000 people are quite plausible when compared to the Pforzheim bombing.

How Were the Dead Disposed Of?

Historian Richard Evans asks:

And how was it imaginable that 200,000 bodies could have been recovered from out of the ruins in less than a month? It would have required a veritable army of people to undertake such work, and hundreds of sorely needed vehicles to transport the bodies. The effort actually undertaken to recover bodies was considerable, but there was no evidence that it reached the levels required to remove this number.[\[30\]](#)

Richard Evans does not recognize that the incineration of corpses on the Dresden market square, the Altmarkt, was not the only means of disposing of bodies at Dresden. A British sergeant reported on the disposal of bodies at Dresden:

They had to pitchfork shriveled bodies onto trucks and wagons and cart them to shallow graves on the outskirts of the city. But after two weeks of work the job became too much to cope with and they found other means to gather up the dead. They burned bodies in a great heap in the center of the city, but the most effective way, for sanitary reasons, was to take flamethrowers and burn the dead as they lay in the ruins. They would just turn the flamethrowers into the houses, burn the dead and then close off the entire area. The whole city is flattened. They were unable to clean up the dead lying beside roads for several weeks.[\[31\]](#)

Historians also differ on whether or not large numbers of bodies in Dresden were so incinerated in the bombing that they could no longer be recognized as bodies. Frederick Taylor mentions Walter Weidauer, the high burgomaster of Dresden in the postwar period, as stating

[T]here is no substance to the reports that tens of thousands of victims were so thoroughly incinerated that no individual traces could be found. Not all were identified, but—especially as most victims died of asphyxiation or physical injuries—the overwhelming majority of individuals' bodies could at least be distinguished as such.[\[32\]](#)

Other historians cite evidence that bodies were incinerated beyond recognition. Alexander McKee quotes Hildegard Prasse on what she saw at the Altmarkt after the Dresden bombings:

What I saw at the Altmarkt was cruel. I could not believe my eyes. A few of the men who had been left over [from the Front] were busy shoveling corpse after corpse on top of the other. Some were completely carbonized and buried in this pyre, but nevertheless they were all burnt here because of the danger of an epidemic. In any case, what was left of them was hardly recognizable. They were buried later in a mass grave on the Dresdner Heide.[\[33\]](#)

Marshall De Bruhl cites a report found in an urn by a gravedigger in 1975 written on March 12, 1945, by a young soldier identified only as Gottfried. This report states:

I saw the most painful scene ever....Several persons were near the entrance, others at the flight of steps and many others further back in the cellar. The shapes suggested human corpses. The body structure was recognizable and the shape of the skulls, but they had no clothes. Eyes and hair carbonized but not shrunk. When touched, they disintegrated into ashes, totally, no skeleton or separate bones.

I recognized a male corpse as that of my father. His arm had been jammed between two stones, where shreds of his grey suit remained. What sat not far from him was no doubt mother. The slim build and shape of the head left no doubt. I found a tin and put their ashes in it. Never had I been so sad, so alone and full of despair. Carrying my treasure and crying I left the gruesome scene. I was trembling all over and my heart threatened to burst. My helpers stood there, mute under the impact.[\[34\]](#)

The incineration of large numbers of people in Dresden is also indicated by estimates of the extreme temperature reached in Dresden during the firestorm. While no survivor has ever reported the actual temperature reached during the Dresden firestorm, many historians estimate that temperatures reached 1,500° Centigrade (2,732° Fahrenheit).[\[35\]](#) Since temperatures in a cremation chamber

normally reach only 1,400 degrees to 1,800 degrees Fahrenheit^[36], large numbers of people in Dresden would have been incinerated from the extreme heat generated in the firestorm.

Historians also differ on whether or not bodies are still being recovered in Dresden. For example, Frederick Taylor states: “Since 1989—even with the extensive excavation and rebuilding that followed the fall of communism in Dresden—no bodies have been recovered at all, even though careful archaeological investigations have accompanied the redevelopment.”^[37]

Marshall De Bruhl does not agree with Taylor’s statement. De Bruhl notes that numerous other skeletons of victims were discovered in the ruins of Dresden as rubble was removed or foundations for new buildings were dug. De Bruhl states:

One particularly poignant discovery was made when the ruins adjacent to the Altmarkt were being excavated in the 1990s. The workmen found the skeletons of a dozen young women who had been recruited from the countryside to come into Dresden and help run the trams during the war. They had taken shelter from the rain of bombs in an ancient vaulted subbasement, where their remains lay undisturbed for almost 50 years.^[38]

Conclusion

The destruction from the Dresden bombings was so massive that exact figures of deaths will never be obtainable. However, the statement from the Dresden Commission of Historians that “definitely no more than 25,000” died in the Dresden bombings is probably inaccurate. An objective analysis of the evidence indicates that almost certainly far more than 25,000 people died from the bombings of Dresden. Based on a comparison to the Pforzheim bombing and the other similar bombing attacks, a death toll in Dresden of 250,000 people is easily possible.

ENDNOTES

[1] McKee, Alexander, *Dresden 1945: The Devil’s Tinderbox*, New York: E.P. Dutton, Inc., 1984, p. 275.

[2] Evans, Richard J., *Lying about Hitler: History, Holocaust, and the David Irving Trial*, New York: Basic Books, 2001, p. 177.

[3] Taylor, Frederick, *Dresden: Tuesday, February 13, 1945*, New York: HarperCollins, 2004, p. 354.

[4] <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/death-toll-debate-how-many-died-in-the-bombing-of-dresden-a-581992.html>.

[5] Evans, Richard J., *Lying about Hitler: History, Holocaust, and the David Irving Trial*, New York: Basic Books, 2001, p. 158.

[6] DeBruhl, Marshall, *Firestorm: Allied Airpower and the Destruction of Dresden*, New York: Random House, Inc., 2006, p. 200.

[7] Irving, David, *The Destruction of Dresden*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964, p. 98.

[8] Ten Dyke, Elizabeth A., *Dresden: Paradoxes of Memory in History*, London and New York: Routledge, 2001, p. 82.

- [9] Taylor, Frederick, *Dresden: Tuesday, February 13, 1945*, New York: HarperCollins, 2004, pp. 134, 227-228.
- [10] *Ibid.*, p. 227.
- [11] *Ibid.*, pp. 229, 232.
- [12] Evans, Richard J., *Lying about Hitler: History, Holocaust, and the David Irving Trial*, New York: Basic Books, 2001, p. 174.
- [13] Taylor, Frederick, *Dresden: Tuesday, February 13, 1945*, New York: HarperCollins, 2004, pp. 3, 406. See also River, Charles Editors, *The Firebombing of Dresden: The History and Legacy of the Allies' Most Controversial Attack on Germany*, Introduction, p. 2.
- [14] McKee, Alexander, *Dresden 1945: The Devil's Tinderbox*, New York: E.P. Dutton, Inc., 1984, p. 177.
- [15] <http://glossaryhesperado.blogspot.com/2008/04/facts-about-dresden-bombings.html>.
- [16] Cox, Sebastian, "The Dresden Raids: Why and How," in Addison, Paul and Crang, Jeremy A., (eds.), *Firestorm: The Bombing of Dresden, 1945*, Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2006, pp. 44, 46.
- [17] DeBruhl, Marshall, *Firestorm: Allied Airpower and the Destruction of Dresden*, New York: Random House, Inc., 2006, pp. 204-205.
- [18] Neitzel, Sönke, "The City under Attack," in Addison, Paul and Crang, Jeremy A., (eds.), *Firestorm: The Bombing of Dresden, 1945*, Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2006, pp. 68-69.
- [19] *Ibid.*, pp. 69, 72, 76.
- [20] Cox, Sebastian, "The Dresden Raids: Why and How," in Addison, Paul and Crang, Jeremy A., (eds.), *Firestorm: The Bombing of Dresden, 1945*, Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2006, pp. 52-53.
- [21] Davis, Richard G., *Carl A. Spaatz and the Air War in Europe*, Washington, D.C.: Center for Air Force History, 1993, p. 557.
- [22] Hastings, Max, *Bomber Command*, New York: The Dial Press, 1979, pp. 347-348.
- [23] Cox, Sebastian, "The Dresden Raids: Why and How," in Addison, Paul and Crang, Jeremy A., (eds.), *Firestorm: The Bombing of Dresden, 1945*, Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2006, p. 57.
- [24] Overy, Richard, *The Bombers and the Bombed: Allied Air War over Europe, 1940-1945*, New York: Viking Penguin, 2014, p. 314.
- [25] Friedrich, Jörg, *The Fire: The Bombing of Germany*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2006, p. 94.
- [26] *Ibid.*, p. 91. See also DeBruhl, Marshall, *Firestorm: Allied Airpower and the Destruction of Dresden*, New York: Random House, Inc., 2006, p. 255.
- [27] Neitzel, Sönke, "The City under Attack," in Addison, Paul and Crang, Jeremy A., (eds.), *Firestorm: The Bombing of Dresden, 1945*, Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2006, p. 77.

[28] DeBruhl, Marshall, *Firestorm: Allied Airpower and the Destruction of Dresden*, New York: Random House, Inc., 2006, p. 210. See also McKee, Alexander, *Dresden 1945: The Devil's Tinderbox*, New York: E.P. Dutton, Inc., 1984, p. 112.

[29] Russell, Alan, "Why Dresden Matters," in Addison, Paul and Crang, Jeremy A., (eds.), *Firestorm: The Bombing of Dresden, 1945*, Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2006, p. 162.

[30] Evans, Richard J., *Lying About Hitler: History, Holocaust, and the David Irving Trial*, New York: Basic Books, 2001, p. 158.

[31] Regan, Dan, *Stars and Stripes* London edition, Saturday, May 5, 1945, Vol. 5, No. 156.

[32] Taylor, Frederick, *Dresden: Tuesday, February 13, 1945*, New York: HarperCollins, 2004, p. 448.

[33] McKee, Alexander, *Dresden 1945: The Devil's Tinderbox*, New York: E.P. Dutton, Inc., 1984, p. 248.

[34] DeBruhl, Marshall, *Firestorm: Allied Airpower and the Destruction of Dresden*, New York: Random House, Inc., 2006, pp. 253-254.

[35] Alexander McKee cites estimates of 3,000 degrees Fahrenheit (McKee, Alexander, *Dresden 1945: The Devil's Tinderbox*, New York: E.P. Dutton, Inc., 1984, p. 176).

[36] <http://nfda.org/planning-a-funeral/cremation/160.html#hot>.

[37] Taylor, Frederick, *Dresden: Tuesday, February 13, 1945*, New York: HarperCollins, 2004, p. 448.

[38] DeBruhl, Marshall, *Firestorm: Allied Airpower and the Destruction of Dresden*, New York: Random House, Inc., 2006, p. 254.

Author(s):	John Wear
Title:	How Many Germans Died under RAF Bombs at Dresden in 1945?
Sources:	<i>Inconvenient History</i> , Vol. 11, No. 1 (2019)
Dates:	published: 2019-03-24, first posted: 2019-03-25 02:08:05

<http://inconvenienthistory.com/11/1/6600>